

Antonio Maria GENTILI
THE BARNABITES



**Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded**

Chapter 10

THE ANGELIC PAOLA ANTONIA NEGRI

Introduction:

RELATIONSHIP BARNABITES – ANGELICS

The Barnabites were called Clerics Regular of St. Paul Decapitated, and the Angelics Angelic Sisters of St. Paul Converted, but practically they were one family without any scruples of promiscuity.

While the Founder and Fr. Ferrari were still alive, the monasteries were still in construction not allowing, therefore, that freedom of movement we register later under Fr. Morigia; but already at the time of Fr. Ferrari the documents describe how the Angelics used to participate in the Fathers' Chapters with full right to speak and to vote. No Superior was elected without the votes of the Angelics present, and most likely it happened also for the Angelics, although we do not have any document to prove it. The same is for the giving of the habit and for the profession: indeed, in the formula of profession, our confreres promised obedience, chastity, and poverty to God and... “to our Father and Mother,” that is, the Superior and the Angelic Paola Antonia Negri. The Father is Fr. Morigia, and let us remember that the Holy Founder in the Letters VI, VII, and VIII associates himself with Negri, rather Letter VIII ends with: “Yours in Christ, Father: Anthony M. priest, and Mother: Angelic Paola Antonia.” No surprise then if the Angelics would take part in the chapter of censures, and that the Fathers would officially accept decisions taken in these chapters; no surprise if at the death of Fr. De Caseis, although at night, all the Angelics with Negri and Torelli, are present at his death-bed; no surprise if... some Fathers would go to some Angelics for spiritual direction even.

How did they reach this point?

We know that up to the beginning of the 1900's when Canon Law was revised, the confessor of the community was the Superior or someone assigned by him, with the title as Master. In our first Community the Master was elected and he was the director of the novices and also of some seniors, including the Superior. On their part the Superior and the seniors would direct two or three professed. So the spiritual direction was carefully divided creating in the community a relationship of faith, which, if practiced in simplicity and honesty, would guarantee a constant climate of fervor. All of them were free to go from St. Barnabas to St. Paul to consult Negri or Torelli, just as vice versa for the Angelics with the Fathers as confessors or spiritual directors. But when the number of Barnabites grew, and so the fame of Negri, it became impossible for her to listen to all those requesting spiritual counseling, so she asked some sisters to help her in the task. They were called “Mistresses.” We do not know how many were they, but for sure they had a solid formation and preparation, since there are no complains against them.

Paola Antonia Negri

One of the most characteristic and discussed figures of the 16th century is, without doubt, Sr. Paula Antonia, formerly Virginia Negri, a truly exceptional woman. The esteem, affection, and devotion that had been shown for St. Catherine of Siena and the Venerable Arcangela Panigarola were renewed in her. Even the Holy Founder, Bishop Giberti, Msgr. Crivelli, the Marquis Del Vasto, Senator Casati, and the Patrician Cappello manifested this veneration, not to speak of the Countess of Guastalla who made her religious profession before Sr. Negri without Zaccaria's knowledge.

The Holy Founder had a great esteem for her and, although very young, he made her Mistress of novices, and Fr. Morigia too did not hesitate to use her in the government. Now, if it is true that the tree is judged by its fruits, we have plenty of them to consider. For sure she was a vehement leader drawing others to her following: the short exhortations to the Fathers as reported in the Acts of the Community are indeed marvelous, deep, and very refreshing. These ideas were well known to our Fathers. Pauline or biblical, she presented them in such a manner that they were always new and interesting.

During her trips to visit the various missionary posts in the Venetian Republic, at each station she would inflame the hearts and would always come back with a group of postulants, even up to ten, both for the Barnabites and the Angelics. She was considered a saint and, indeed, a modern St. Catherine of Siena. The Acts of the community tell us of ecstasy she experienced even during Chapters in front of the whole community. Even Fr. Mazenta who was not too fond of her, was compelled to write on the edge of the register of the Acts: "To be admired, and sincere." In May 1553, when she had been singled out by the Inquisition as the cause of all our so called problems, Fr. Jerome Dal Torso had to admit in the Chapter: "It is through her that we have all the good that we have."

Equal to the esteem of the superiors was that of the subjects in all three Zaccarian Institutes. Sr. Negri had very great influence because of the special inspiration with which they considered her to be enriched. They did not hesitate to address her as Divine Mother, Admirable Teacher. It was Sr. Negri to preside at all the chapters held in the Church of St. Barnabas, even though it would have been a greater right of Msgr. Crivelli, the Inquisitor, or of the Bishops of Perugia and Pesaro, both of the Simonetta family, and of Torelli herself.

She not only presided but was the one who deliberated and decided. Nothing of importance was determined without her opinion which they undoubtedly endorsed. The Barnabites made their profession in her presence as pointed out by a formula registered in the Acts.

Biography

There is not as yet a critical life of Sr. Negri. It is not easy to write one since many documents referring to her have been destroyed. The few that remain reflect very deeply the exaggerated admiration of some and the implacable hatred of others. Because of this, historical truth is often falsified. Drawing from both, here is a biographical profile drawing the information as impartially as possible from the statements of each author.

Infancy

Virginia Negri was born in Castellanza in 1508, from Lazarus, a school teacher, and Elizabeth Doria, a woman of outstanding virtue who dedicated herself to the education of her children. The first, Camillus, will become a Barnabite priest. The Founder calls him a “worker” constantly dedicated to the apostolate, and an old chronicle calls him “a noble and enlightened young man.” In 1534 he received the habit from the Founder, and celebrated his first Mass on April 1, 1537, in the Monastery of the Angelics.

The first of the two Sisters, Porzia, got married, but after the death of her husband she entered the Monastery of “The Humble of the Crucified” where she will become the Prioress. She stayed always very close to the Angelics even participating in the mission in Vicenza (1537). The younger sister, Angela, joined the Angelics with the name Battistina, and will die as Prioress of St. Paul, in 1550.

Although from her early years Virginia was quick and vivacious, she could hardly read and write because her mother had thought it more opportune to train her in household duties and domestic work. She had also become an expert embroider.

Around 1520 the Negri family transferred to Milan and was fortunate to reside near St. Marta Monastery. This was providential for Virginia who had the opportunity to approach Abbot Bellotti, Bishop of Grenoble, who became her spiritual director and directed her in the ways of the spirit.

Crucial encounters

Virginia dedicated herself with great ardor to the practice of virtue. In 1524 when Bellotti had to leave Milan for political reasons, she reverted to her old self. This would have been fatal had not one of her sisters, probably Porzia, who had a special aptitude “for helping young, inexperienced girls,” succeeded in drawing her out of that lukewarmness and brought her back to her original fervor.

Thus Virginia “like those who take a step backward to make a great leap forward,” learned from this youthful error to draw so much willpower that she not only regained her lost position but surpassed it by a long shot.

When Bellotti returned at the end of that year, Virginia began, under his guidance, to dedicate herself totally to works of charity, especially visits to the sick and to hospitals, where she performed many acts of abnegation.

Without doubt, from this time on, although she was very young, she must have enrolled in the Oratory of the Eternal Wisdom, since she seemed to practice the same exercises characteristic of that pious association.

When Bellotti died in 1528, Virginia had the fortune to meet a likely substitute in Fra Battista Carioni da Crema, who did not hesitate to introduce this well-disposed young lady to the Countess Torelli who was considering establishing a college for religious virgins. Torelli was enthusiastic and immediately invited her to join the work she was just beginning.

Virginia lives with the Countess Torelli

Negri, rich only in virtue, accepted the lady's generous offer and went to live with her. She brought her sister Angela and later even Porzia, a widow. Her brother Camillus, meanwhile, joined Zaccaria's first companions.

When Fra Battista da Crema died in 1533, she placed herself completely in the Holy Founder's hands. He had such great hopes for her that often he preferred to give her personally those teachings that he intended to give to all the Sisters.

On February 27, 1536, Zaccaria gave her the religious habit and changed her name to Paola Antonia: Paola because of the deep devotion they both had to the apostle and which gave them a unique idea of perfection and apostolate, and Antonia in honor of the great saintly hermit, Anthony the Abbot.

Mistress of Novices

The following March 4, she was nominated by Zaccaria and the chapter of the new Congregation, Mistress of Novices, who were 24 that year: "every day new recruits were joining this army." The choice fell on the one with a "rare spirit" and able to lead them toward perfection. When she was sent out on a mission she could not hold this office, but she was always addressed as Mother Mistress, a title her spiritual children willingly continued to give her because as a teacher she truly directed them on the spiritual path.

Sr. Paola Antonia knew how to implement admirably the Founder's expectations. She formed the novices according to his directives and taught them how to live simultaneously in the active and interior life.

In the Missions

On July 2, 1537, she went with the Founder to the first mission of the Zaccarian family, in Vicenza, where she succeeded admirably, and then to Verona where she attracted not a few spiritual daughters. In 1544, the Venice mission was accepted. About two years later, in 1548, Sr. Negri was sent there by her superiors who foresaw the good she would accomplish. Her reputation for sanctity reached its zenith there.

The Divine Mother

Admirers and devotees competed to visit and speak with her, often paying homage which bordered on fanaticism. They would kneel at her feet and ask not only her blessing, but permission to receive Communion. If they were priests, they would ask permission to celebrate Mass.

She had much to do to ward them off, but so deep was their conviction of her virtue that any act she performed was given a favorable interpretation. When she tried to shun them, their admiration and homage increased. One must not forget that a large number of these devotees had been drawn to Christ by her extraordinary influence and thus they felt they owed her esteem and recognition.

A crisis!

Maybe she had a crisis five years before she became the victim of the Inquisition. Always sickish, maybe her condition worsened at that time. In fact, at the end of October 1547, Julius Tiepolo and Peter Paul D'Alessandro complained during the chapter against her attitude toward them; but already since the previous July there had been some complains against her ways of doing things. In all honesty we have to admit that from 1548 she had

become too pushy. She was pressing for many penances, which had lost their meaning, abusing even of the biggest one: deprivation of Holy Communion and of the Mass, to the point that even novices would impose it on the professed, and in the Chapter of April 28, 1548, she authorized the Discreets to take away the Mass from the Superior if proved negligent in his duties; but, wise men as they were, they did not follow her instructions, rather they limited themselves to report to her any negligence by the Superior.

The ban from Venice

There is nothing to demonstrate that she was using insolent and arrogant manners: Angelic Sfondrati, while she expands of the motives which might have caused the ban of the Barnabites and Angelics from Venice, does not say a single word against Negri, not even an indirect hint about her responsibility. Her ancient biographer offers another version: the acts of homage were so insistent and annoying that they caused her to be upset and to lose patience. “Great gentlemen were coming to her and, moved by the sight of a venerable virgin so pleasing to God, they would kneel in front of her and ask her blessing.” She, then, from the intimacy of her heart, was so disturbed that, as to say, was losing her patience and was saying: “Please, stand up; for the love of God stand up or I promise you that you will not visit me anymore. And she was so upset in her spirit that sometime she would leave them.”

One day, Negri must have refused to receive the nobleman Giacomo Foscarini and he, as a vengeance, must have caused the explosion of a “casus belli,” provoking then the ban from the whole Venetian territory. With the report presented to the Senate, the indignant patrician must have accused those foreign (coming from Milan) men and women to be spies of Ferrante Gonzaga, Governor of Milan.

The contemporary and the historians are in perfect agreement that this was a simple pretext to hide the true political motives. Even the candid soul of Sfondrati, in her domestic chronicle, immediate and without any pretension, expands in the explanation of the political reasons through which “it pleased the Divine Majesty, to try his servants, to suddenly interrupt these activities.”

To this realistic picture we have to add a campaign in the printing field with an obscene character aiming at discrediting Barnabites and Angelics about their morality and to sully their names with the arm of irony. The first to spread strange gossips about them was Pietro Aretino in his *Ragionamenti* (Arguments), followed right away by Pietro Nelli in his *Satire alla carlona* (Rough Satires).

Later Fr. Besozzi will tell St. Charles that the heads of the Serenissima were afraid that the attendance to confession, so much emphasized by the Barnabites together with the frequent reception of Holy Communion, was a means to capture the State secrets to be communicated to the Emperor through Milan.

Gossips and insinuations could offer an excellent alibi to put under bad light what was called “the sect of the Countess of Guastalla” and justify an act of force; finally, it was giving the opportunity to oppose the Holy See and satisfy the heretical circles that were spreading in Italy.

Rome had been warned, and the same Nuncio in Venice, Ludovico Beccadelli, had sent the information that “the Congregation of the Paulines or Guastallini was not pleasing to these gentlemen due to their behavior and the meetings they were having with gentlewomen. I have never seen them, but sometime I have heard complains, and strange and various things are said.”

The “Council of Ten” had answered to the Papal Nuncio, dated January 17, 1551, that “having received news about this Congregation for a year already, we have asked information about the things taking place among them, and we have understood some new things about too much authority given to their mother mistress, a 36 to 37 year old woman from Milan, to whom men, women and priests were conferring more than what was convenient; and not having the pleasure for these new ways to be introduced in this city, we thought to dismiss this Congregation...”

Of particular importance for us are the accusations contained in the “Secret Parts” of the deliberation by the Council of Ten, aiming at Negri’s figure and work:

- a) “To understand that in the Congregation they have as head and mistress a young nun, to whom they give the title ‘divine mother’, and to possess the Holy Spirit, and to know the secrets of the heart, etc. and she gives a good spirit to the priests, holds public confessions, and gives penances.
- b) The women of the congregation have strict relation with the priests.
- c) The mother mistress is above the priests and makes them say Mass at her pleasure and she is the one to suspend them from it.”

From what we already know, notice that the accusations are formulated in a rather substantially exact way, as confirmation of the efficient police work of the Serenissima.

Only Negri’s age is wrong, as she was already 43. To avoid other investigations by Rome, the Council attached a letter with other information less precise and definitive:

“Head and mistress of this Congregation was a Milanese woman of 36-37 years, to whom they give the title as divine and say to possess the Holy Spirit, and they hold her as holy and impeccable. In their meetings, where men and women participate, they were asked in great details not only about their daily actions, but words and thoughts. The priests were kneeling in front of this mistress, who was giving them or taking away the license to celebrate, was teaching and interpreting the Scriptures: as these things appeared to us rather absurd, we thought to be better to dismiss them...”

On February 19, 1551, without any process, the “ban” was imposed on the Paulines from the whole Venetian territory: in six days they had to leave Venice and in 15 days the other cities.

The text of the deliberation, approved with 18 positive votes, one against, and seven abstentions, did not mention Negri, but only Fathers Melso and Marta, since they were Venetian subjects.

As usual, it is Bugati to give more precise details like in a great fresco depicting the afflictions inflicted to the Barnabites and the Angelics by this “vain” woman, who accepted without prudence the title as “divine mother,” or “divine mistress,” a title - Bugati says - “taken by itself in the vocabulary of the time, it meant nothing else but excellent, but united to the name mother or mistress, created a reproachable equivocal meaning...” Having given a detailed report of the facts leading to the ban from Venice, of the calumnies divulged in Rome, especially with the Inquisition, against Torelli, Negri, and their “company,” besides the condemnation of Battista da Crema’s works, he reaches the crucial problem of the defamation “in the public press” of the growing Congregation. Bugati notes that “the poor Battista was treated as a solemn heretic and, finally, as founder and director of the Congregation of St. Paul”; in Cremona, since 1553, they started “to proclaim from the pulpits against the same, screaming against the heretics and the followers of Fra Battista”; the famous Dominican theologian Melchior Cano accused “Fra Battista’s” Congregation of

heretical deviations; calumnies against the Paulines were divulged with derision by “libertine poets” and others.

Apostolic Visit

Then the Apostolic Visit took place with the condemnation of Negri. She had to sever any relationship first with the Barnabites, and then even with the Angelics. Officially the case could have been declared closed at the end of November, 1552, with the end of the visit by Msgr. Marini.

For sure the suspicions were dissipated by the Visitor personal experience, but the consequences for the two communities were very tragic, considering also the fact that the Barnabites had to abide to the Constitutions of November 17, 1552, while the Angelics were forced to the cloister life. There were many defections on both sides. Many could not stomach that the “mother mistress” memory would be stained, buried under the heavy weight of the condemnation given by Julius III (July 29, 1552) Breve, accusing her of have “arrogated the title as divine,” throwing on her the whole responsibility for the crisis.

Negri's death

In the Acts “of the most illustrious Marini,” kept unpublished in the archives of the Barnabites in Rome, it is specified: “We order that Sr. Paola Antonia de Negri, with a voluntary companion, be enclosed in the monastery of St. Clair in Milan, where she will not be allowed to talk with any person, except with the Prioress of St. Clair and her companion. Also she will not be allowed to write or to have anyone to write, nor to accept letters or messages from anyone, without our license; and when she or others would reject this our will, then let the secular branch carry on what we have said, and the same for the other measures.”

The execution of these orders, so harsh in the form and in the substance, did not meet any resistance. We have to say that Negri was the first one to obey and to retire in the monastery assigned to her. “Either she was doing it to amend herself or for fear of not being supported in case of an eventual rebellion,” as the adversaries are thinking, or “very calm, not wanting to use favors, which big and infinite would not have being lacking from her sons, deferred any infirmity and her own reason, more than willing she wanted to obey and to be brought to the monastery,” as her supporters sustain. It is a fact that the Angelic’s submission is out of the question.

The sentence stripped Negri of the title as “divine mother,” and ordered her to leave the Angelics, and to be secluded in the monastery of St. Clare. She transferred there in the Fall of 1552 (or 1553, according to Pagani).

The Angelic was tormented by illnesses and sufferings she had to endure throughout her life. She remained in St. Clair for almost two years, from November 1552 to December 1554, until one day her health collapsed. “The doctors – the ancient biographer affirms – after a consultation among themselves, reached the conclusion that a change of air for the mother mistress could help her to recover, so they proposed their suggestion to the Senate which was taking good care of her; the Senate, judging that the life of the mother should be saved in any possible way, by decree commanded someone to arrange for some garden with good air.”

It is clear that this permission to transport Negri to a country side was pulled with force from the Senate by her followers, but first of all it was in violation of the cloister law;

secondly, it was going against a formal order by the ecclesiastical authority, the only one competent to derogate in this matter.

Having overcome her own resistance, thanks to the intervention of the “principal gentlemen” of the city, with the assurance that “once recovered a little she would return,” the Angelic accepted the hospitality of Lady Ippolita of Rho. Was she aware that the permit to go out of the monastery had been granted by the Senate and not by the ecclesiastical authority? “It is strange – the hostile historian replies – that she was the only one to ignore what the whole of Milan knew.”

Anyway, as soon as Fr. Besozzi was informed about the event, he notified Cardinal Alvarez, protector of the Barnabites, so that he could take the necessary measures to ensure Negri’s return in the monastery. In the General Chapter, immediately assembled with 22 confreres present, “the revered Father Superior warned that, since he had heard that the mother mistress had gone out of the monastery of St. Clair, he was commanding everyone not to dare to go to visit her or to write to her, or to send her recommendations or messages, or to deal with anyone dealing with her; and, if he would find out that someone would dare to contradict his precept, he would act against him as if an excommunicated, contumacious and a rebel of the Holy Mother Church.”

And the order from Rome was fast to come: on March 22, 1555, Alvarez sent to Negri the injunction to immediately return in the monastery of St. Clair. The Angelic obeyed right away and had the nuns carry her “on a stretcher” due to the pains she was suffering.

It seems that the nuns did not want to accept her in those precarious conditions: “At first begged and notified, and for the excessive compassion of the severity of the illness, they were differing to make her entry.”

We have to add that Negri had a notary public draft a declaration that it was not up to her to follow the orders of the Cardinal.

So Negri went back to the house of friends, but shortly after, on April 4, 1555, she was rending her soul to God, assisted by a group of disciples and the Countess Torelli. She was 47 years old.

She was buried in the Church of the monastery of “The Humble of the Crucified,” where her sister Porzia was Prioress. On the tomb the inscription read: “*Calamo sexum, mundi contemptu coelum vici*” (she overcame the limits of the female sex, and she conquered heaven despising the world).

Appraisal of Sr. Negri

All the witnesses at the Process for the canonization of St. Anthony M. Zaccaria agreed in a negative appraisal of Negri, recognizing in her “presumed holiness,” or rather sure pride, badly hidden under an ambiguous and slippery asceticism, one of the causes of the greater tribulations of the Congregation after the death of the Founder.

The Apologia by Fr. Besozzi in defense of the Congregation and the triumph of the truth in the “Negri case,” suggests that she was almost a totally different person while the Founder was alive. Indeed in reading the letter of the Servant of God addressed to the Angelics on June 10, 1539, few days before his death, one can argue that the same Founder was the first to realize the upcoming aberration of Negri, and had a premonition of the ruinous end. This emphasizes the spiritual discernment enriching the Holy Founder, while putting on completely different levels the Founder and the “deceived” Angelic. According to this vision Anthony Mary saw in time the defects of pride, lukewarmness, double face, and

tyranny which will later on become clearly manifested in the actions of the Angelic Paola Antonia Negri.

But is this interpretation historically right? The obvious and hinted reproaches of Zaccaria against a lazy life in the midst of comforts, signs of imperfection and of perdition, playing on the byname Saul/Paul, or old/new man, were not openly directed against Negri, but against a hypothetical “saint.” Besides, the whole letter was aiming at the “freedom great saints have,” that is, those who have already reached a stage of perfection, able “to understand” things which others, less perfect and on the road of perfection, can not even hear: “I will tell you only those things which only you would understand, but also those things which our Angelics would understand, leaving up to you, in your interior, to think over the rest” (Lt 9, 46).

Sr. Negri's Spiritual Letters

During her lifetime, Sr. Negri lived in various cities, and like her Founder she had felt the need to send spiritual letters to her distant children. Since she could hardly write, she would propose a topic to a sister or a friend so he/she could write it.

The letters were dictated by Negri or commissioned to various writers, and we have their names. Among the women outstanding are the Sfondrati sisters, and Isabetta Godi; among the men, Paul Omodei, then still a young cleric, Baldassar Medici, and especially Fr. Giampiero Besozzi. But the very first writer was the Holy Founder himself who composed a letter for the Angelic Negri addressed to Francesco Cappelli.

The letters are signed with “A. P. A.”, which authenticated not only the letter, but especially the message coming from her spirit. We have a total of 133 letters, of which 62 are still unpublished.

The Chapter of April 27, 1551, about two months from the Venetian ban, charged James M. Berna to translate into Latin the letters of the Rev. Mother. The document contains 85 letters, with notes on the side for Biblical references. It ends with an analytic index of the great ascetic-mystic themes dear to the Paulines.

Another document of the time has 53 letters with the title “Letters of the Divine Mother Angelic Paola Antonia, Mother Mistress of the Sacred Place St. Paul the Apostle in Milan.”

In 1564, two ex-Barnabites, John Paul Folperti, Rector of the Taeggi college, and Gerolamo Raimondi will prepare the publication of 17 letters dated from 1544 to 1549. Fr. Laynez, the Jesuit General, was delegated to revise the letters. He released a statement affirming that he had corrected the book “in a few places.” He then declared its publication would contribute to the salvation and edification of many.

Father Laynez' approval is dated June 30, 1563. In 1564, the book was issued without typographical notes in Milan with the title: “Spiritual Letters of the Devout Religious, Sr. Paola Antonia Negri, a Milanese,”

When Besozzi saw the letters published with ecclesiastical approval, he feared for himself, since he had denounced her as deceived by Satan. He then tried everything to stop the publication making also recourse to the Milanese authorities, and specifically to St. Charles Borromeo.

The biography of Sr. Paula Antonia

Twelve years later, 1576, John Paul Folperti, wanted to republish the letters in Rome this time, instead of Milan. The new text contains 70 letters (including the 17 of the previous edition) in three sections: 22 about “the feasts of the Lord”; 25 about “the feasts of Our Lady and the Saints”; 23 about “various suggestions to different people.” The Letters had a lengthy introduction which constituted a Life of the devout religious Angelic Paola Antonia de' Negri, composed by John Baptist Fontana de' Conti.

Fontana had not known Sr. Negri but he obtained information from the rich material supplied him by Folperti but which seemed a little confused. He made some errors like the list of people who had known Sister Negri. He named one person twice, once with her family name and once with her religious name. Moreover, in accordance with the style of the period, it is highly laudatory and gives excessive importance to extraordinary events which make it rather unreliable in spots. At the same time one must not forget that since it was destined to fall into the hands of contemporaries or near-contemporaries of Sr. Negri, there must have been some basic truth under the exaggerated tone.

The republication of the letters with a resume of Sister's life was a threat to Besozzi who feared that his intrigue in condemning Sr. Negri might be exposed. He felt it best to write an Apologia of himself in which he apparently refuted what Fontana had written.

This pamphlet remained unpublished because the superiors did not deem it wise; moreover, they feared that he might pressure St. Charles Borromeo into again prohibiting the publication of the book and reopening the trial and bringing to light certain documents concerning Sr. Negri.

This Apologia conditioned the future historians: those who follow the Apologia, oppose the Divine Mother; those who follow Fontana, exalt her.

Someone to be forgotten?

The Angelic Sfondrati in her history of the Monastery of St. Paul shows even excessive discretion in mentioning Paola Antonia Negri, and professes a strong veneration for the “holy Foundress” Ludovica Torelli, without mentioning the growing dissent between the two women; she attributes the Negri's exodus to the discomforts of cloistered life and to not better specified impediments of the cenobitic life.

The Anonymous Angelic in her “Memoirs” mentions only that on the night of June 28, 1551, P. A. Negri, together with the Prioress, tried to escape from the monastery, due to the growing disagreements with Ludovica Torelli. Then, she adds that maybe she did it to found another house and so to get out of the conflict. The further deterioration of the situation in the monastery led to the decision of the Visitor to transfer her to St. Clare.

Among the Barnabites we find two factions: those who remained faithful to the Congregation and those who abandoned it.

Those who opted to remain in the Congregation after the Apostolic Visit of 1552 changed their attitude toward the “Divine Mother.” The old ingenuous and unconditional devotion was reversed to rejection.

The faithful ones, bound to her by deep ties of devotion and gratitude, followed her in her trials determined to rehabilitate the one who, as Folperti says, “had been the mother mistress for all of us,” to the point that “we are not ashamed to have been disciples of this Rev. Angelic.”

The same attitude we find in another ex-Barnabite and faithful follower of Paola Antonia, Pagani who attributes all the misfortunes of the 'Divine Mother' to the dissent with

Torelli, and concludes: “her life followed the Christian, religious, and perfect way” and “not (like the accusers) the proud, heretic, obstinate, hypocrite, lying, sensual, filthy, and totally out of law and debauched, but on the contrary the humble, longing for humiliation and shame, catholic and most God-fearing, humble and obedient in anything of faith...”

It is Pagani to tell us that when Negri was transferred to St. Clare “until some controversies present in the Monastery of St. Paul would quite down,” her behavior was worthy of praise, coming out of it two years later under most severe and purifying sufferings.

And when she was ordered to go back in the monastery, she declared to “want to die in obedience, (rather) than live in the doubt of not having obeyed.”

At the end it seems that Paola Antonia Negri is destined to remain a controversial character behind the judgments of contemporaries who are too involved to be partial.

What for sure remains intact is the message that transpires from her correspondence, which is deeply biblical, rich of patristic resonances, faithful follower of the spirituality of the Pauline origins, of which it is a faithful mirror, still today drawing great attraction.

What Fr. Cortenovis had said for the writings of the Holy Founder: “You will see in them the character of Fra Battista,” whose works “are full of sublime teachings,” we can repeat for the letters of Antonia Paola Negri.

Conclusive observations

Unfortunately space does not allow us to analyze some problems and to answer questions which have emerged through the narration. We are limiting ourselves to some flashes to underline the most characteristic points, starting with the title “divine mother,” attributed to Negri, and her “extra-power” over men and women.

Take note that the adjective “divine” was commonly used in the 1500’s without the meaning that we attribute to it today: the Spanish domination in Italy had great influence over uses and customs, even the style, the language, becoming more and more solemn and pompous. This qualification was not skimmed for illustrious painters and poets to indicate, perhaps with a certain adulation, their excellent qualities in their field.

To limit ourselves to our field, we find out that the adjective “divine” was very much spread and given, for example, to Fra Battista da Crema, to St. Anthony M. Zaccaria, the Countess Torelli, to Davidico, etc...

The very concept as “divine mother,” which at first sight sounds rather scandalous to our ears, in time, with the daily use, loses its original impact. Anyway, it was not new at all as it is met often in the ascetic-mystic tradition of the Middle Ages, for example among the Beguines of the Low Country.

About the absolute authority exercised by Negri, we have to keep in mind that at the beginnings of the “Paulines” in Milan (Barnabites, Angelics and Married) there were four very “characteristic” personalities: Fra Battista, Zaccaria, Torelli and Negri. As the two male figures disappeared (1534 the first, and 1539 the second) the two women were left with the prestige and the halo as “co-foundresses”: It is understandable that they were surrounded by a alone of veneration, especially by the newly arrived. Add that Torelli never wanted to be a religious and, therefore, she left the Institute to follow her vocation as an educator.

The only survival: Negri. It was natural for all to consider and treat her as the “mother” par excellence, as they were seeing in her the living personification of the “primigenia inspiration,” the heir and bearer of the original charism.

The unhealed contrast with Fr. Besozzi, that exploded during the last years after a long peaceful harmony in ideals and apostolate, has to be attributed, first of all, to the diversity of temperaments and psychology, to hardenings polemic in nature, to a certain personal pride and environmental circumstances, partially independent from their will; and, perhaps, it is part of the unexplainable mystery of the human heart, known only to God in its truth.

To admit a total abuse of power by Negri we should accuse of simple-mindedness and infantilism so many illustrious personalities, including the Holy Founder Anthony M. Zaccaria and numerous souls who always admired Negri. We should also condemn all of her past as diabolically false: too strong, indeed, the difference, better the abyss that would separate the first period of her life from the last. So sudden a reversal would not have adequate motivations and, therefore, the judgment seems to be hasty and arbitrary.

In conclusion: to us it seems to be much simpler, after the discussion over events and opinions, to sustain the innocence of the Angelic and that it is about time to render her full justice. Her condemnation by the ecclesiastical authority, under the pressure of political disciplinary and doctrinal reasons which had nothing to do with her, was a fatal mistake and a choice to avoid the worst. To have accepted humbly and without rebellion that sentence, to our opinion, not only does not diminish but increases her moral grandeur.

A serene revision in the historical setting seems more than necessary to throw light over this bewildering “case,” which had indeed fascinated the contemporaries.

Without doubt the figure of Paola Antonia Negri has to be enumerated among the rank of souls who were longing for the Christian reform of society, following the protestant movement, that is, a crucial epoch of the modern world, very much like ours anxieties, and before the Council of Trent would emanate and channel the various spiritual forces of Catholicism toward a new setting of Church.